Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2017: Glaciers Melt, Mountain Goats Cope*

Article 4

2017

The Leap: Journalist Meets Goat in Glacier National Park

Lisa Densmore Ballard

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Journalist meets goat in Glacier National Park

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The yell took my attention away from the precarious footing. "He's going to jump!" shouted my hiking partner, Bill Powell. Facing Bill down a very steep scree-covered slope above the upper Grinnell Glacier Trail in Glacier National Park, I whipped around in time to see a small mountain goat kid leap across a ten-foot gap between two narrow ledges above me. Its twin was a few steps behind. I snapped a shot of the second goat and then noticed their mother a few yards behind her offspring: a huge nanny, her thick white coat gleaming against the dark wet rock. As she jumped, my camera shutter clicked, capturing the moment from takeoff to landing.

I wanted to see a mountain goat (*Oreamnos americanus*), and Glacier National Park is one of the few places in North America where these sure-footed mammals frequently show themselves. Although these animals are endemic to the subalpine and alpine zones of the northern Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest, the person who spots one needs to be half-goat, use technical climbing gear, or be extremely lucky. Mountain goats inhabit the most rugged, remote elevations of any hoofed North American mammal.

Mountain goats excel at surviving in such an unforgiving environment. Their shaggy white coats keep them warm and camouflage them against the snow. For traction on rock and ice, their cloven hooves spread like stabilizers while the rough, pliable pads in the middle of each hoof mold to the craggy surfaces. They also have small toenails that grip rock and snow like natural toe picks.

Despite their name, mountain goats are not true goats. These agile animals are really "goat-antelopes," a subfamily of hoofed animals that includes true goats, sheep, chamois, and musk ox. They are the sole members of their genus, *Oreamnos,* derived from the Greek words for "mountain nymph." They're hardly nymph-like, though; in fact, their bulky, low center of gravity aids their stability on narrow ledges.

Before the nanny and her two kids leapt the gap in the cliff wall, I had carefully climbed the steep scree field for a closer look at another mountain goat. I spotted it unexpectedly as Bill and I trudged up the trail. Our attention had focused on the view of cloud-shrouded Grinnell Glacier and the stunningly turquoise Grinnell Lake below it, to our left. Now and again, I glanced casually at the cliffs towering above us to the right, impressed by the

A mountain goat leaps a ten-foot gap in the rocks above the Grinnell Glacier Trail in Glacier National Park. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

massiveness of the bleak yet beautiful topography and hoping to add a pika to the list of creatures we had already seen that day.

Over the three miles we had already trekked from the trailhead at Swiftcurrent Lake, the landscape had changed from tall conifers to deciduous shrubland to alpine tundra. At one bend in the trail, a mule deer fawn, its spots fading in summer's twilight, greeted us as its mother browsed a nearby bush. A little farther up the path, a bachelor herd of bighorn rams peered down at us from a rock perch as we walked by. Then I glimpsed a white furry face with piercing black eyes peering down at us from a flat spot atop an oversized boulder. A mountain goat!

Seeing a mountain goat was high on my wish list for my trip to Glacier. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark saw only one of the iconic western animals on their famous expedition, in 1805 in Idaho, and only from a long distance. To learn more about the animal they called a "mountain sheep," they later bought a pelt from the American Indians they encountered along the Columbia River.

Sir Alexander McKenzie, the Scottish explorer who traversed Canada a decade before the Lewis and Clark expedition, was likely the first European to see a mountain goat, which he called a "white buffalo." Historians speculate his Canadian white buffalo was really a mountain goat. Although white or albino bison exist, they are extremely rare and do not inhabit the alpine regions of the northwest where McKenzie came across the species.

If McKenzie had seen the mountain goat that stared at me, he might have thought it a unicorn rather than a white buffalo. Both male and female mountain goats normally have a pair of black pointed horns that arc up and back from their brows, but the goat above me had only one horn. I left the trail, carefully navigating my way up the scree to keep my balance and avoid sending a shower of rock down onto Bill. I didn't want to disturb the goat, but I did want to quell my curiosity about its lone horn—and take a photo. I angled to the right, moving slowly and calmly, hoping not to spook it. It let me approach, its dark eyes following my movement but otherwise showing no sign of acknowledgment.

The singular horn was not a freak of nature. The other had broken off at some unknown point in the past. I could see the stub as I got closer. Perhaps this was a female who had lost it defending her young from a grizzly bear or a wolf; more likely, the horn had broken off during an unexpected fall. Gravity accounts for more adult mountain goat mishaps than predators do.

As it turned out, another dozen mountain goats were bedded down among the boulders behind the one-horned watcher. I took photo after photo, ecstatic at the opportunity. After a few minutes, the one-horned goat and two others got up to nibble on tufts of grass, working their way deeper into a chasm hidden from the trail by the jumble of boulders. Instead of following the rest of the herd, the three jumpers veered off on an alternative, higher route where they needed to make their impressive leap.

Once the herd of goats disappeared, Bill and I continued up the trail toward Grinnell Glacier, chattering enthusiastically about the unicorn, the jump, and the park in general. Located in northwestern Montana adjacent to the Canadian border, Glacier National Park is part of the Waterton–Glacier International Peace Park, which also includes Waterton Lakes National Park just north of the 49th parallel in Alberta. In 1932, the Canadian and U.S. governments created the Peace Park, the world's first, as a symbol of friendship. Today, the Peace Park also serves as a World Heritage Site and a World

Bill Powell pauses on the Upper Grinnell Glacier Trail. A finger of the glacier is visible above him. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

Lisa Densmore Ballard on the upper Grinnell Glacier Trail. BILL POWELL

Biosphere Reserve, emphasizing its importance from both a historical and an ecological point of view.

The formation of the two national parks predated the formation of the joint Peace Park by several decades. In 1883, an Oxford-educated Brit named Fredrick Godsal traveled to Alberta, where he established a 20,000-acre cattle ranch in the Waterton Lakes region. He was also a member of the Canadian Alpine Club and an early conservationist. Godsal's idea for the creation of Waterton Lakes National Park came to fruition in 1895, after much opposition in Ottawa. Today, the 125,000-acre national park connects to the 257,000-acre Castle Wildland Provincial Park to its north. The region provides 30 percent of Alberta's and Saskatchewan's fresh water and, combined with Glacier National Park, creates an important wildlife corridor.

Meanwhile, south of the border, Yale-educated writer and naturalist George Bird Grinnell spent many years exploring the area and lobbying for the creation of Glacier National Park. Helping his cause was the fact that, as the railroads expanded westward, they carried tourists eager to see the towering mountains of the northern Rockies adorned with their white glaciated mantles and teeming with unusual wildlife, including mountain goats. By the late 1890s, a visitor could get off a train in Belton, Montana

(now West Glacier), take a stagecoach to Lake MacDonald, cross the eight-mile lake by boat, and get on a horse or hike into the backcountry. There were no roads and few trails, but the trip grew in popularity, and lodges and other facilities sprang up on the edge of the park and within its interior.

In 1900, the U.S. government officially designated the region a "forest preserve," which added some protection, but still permitted mining and homesteading. It took Grinnell and his colleagues another ten years and the election of another Yale graduate, President William Taft, before Glacier National Park finally became a national park.

The number of visitors increased exponentially with the national park designation, leading to the construction of the Going-to-the-Sun Road, now a national historic landmark in its own right. This 50-mile scenic byway bisects the million-acre park between the entrances at West Glacier and St. Mary. An impressive feat of engineering, it hangs off the sides of cliffs as it winds over Logan Pass (elevation 6,647 feet) on the Continental Divide. Completed in 1932, this road changed the way people saw Glacier National Park; I was no exception.

Glacier National Park contains more than 700 miles of trails. Today, it is a hiker's and backpacker's paradise because more than 93 percent of the park is managed as wilderness. That was the main draw for my group as we put together our trip there. Our original plan was nowhere near Going-to-the-Sun Road. We planned a multiday backpacking trip in the northwest corner of the park, from Kintla Lake over Boulder Pass to Hole in the Wall, where an 800-foot waterfall pours from a hole in a tiered rock headwall, then over Brown Pass to Lake Francis. The 50-miler ends at the campground on the southeast shore of Bowman Lake, about eight miles as the crow flies from the start of the trek.

Before our early September expedition, there was much speculation among friends and family regarding the wisdom of our plan. The park had garnered headlines in July and August for wildfires that closed the east side of Logan Pass along Going-to-the-Sun Road and adjacent backcountry areas. Because the fires were not close to our intended route, we gave the trip the green light.

Ironically, the much-needed precipitation that finally quenched the wildfires also doused our backpacking plans. Just after our arrival, more than a foot of heavy, wet snow fell at higher elevations in the park, including the two passes we planned to traverse. With three-season tents unable to handle a snow load and only summer hiking boots for footwear, we were

ill-equipped for winter conditions. Disappointed, we checked into one of the campgrounds in the park.

Regrouping over a pizza dinner at the Swiftcurrent Café, near our campsite, we picked several destinations in the park that seemed viable as day hikes, beginning with the three-mile route to Hidden Lake that starts at Logan Pass, climbs to an overlook at 7,050 feet, and descends to the lake in the narrow valley below Bearhat Mountain. My husband, Jack, and Bill were particularly interested in going to Hidden Lake, one of the few bodies of water in the park with a reputation for good fishing. In 1983, then–Vice President George H. W. Bush hiked to Hidden Lake to cast for Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Jack had successfully fished there once before.

The hike left the visitor center at the top of Logan Pass, along a boardwalk that climbed steadily through an alpine meadow known as the Hanging Gardens. A month earlier, a carpet of yellow balsamroot, Indian paintbrush, and other subalpine wildflowers would have colored the landscape on either side of the wooden walkway, but with the fresh snow blanketing the ground, the boardwalk mainly served to keep our hiking boots dry.

The boardwalk eventually turned to a dirt footpath. After gaining about 500 feet in elevation, we reached an overlook but didn't pause. The view was completely obscured by fog.

From the overlook, the trail descended 700 feet to the lakeshore. Though it's one of the better-traveled paths in the park, we saw few other hikers past the overlook on such a raw, blustery day. We caught no fish, but we were not completely disappointed. As we repacked our rods for the climb back to the trailhead, Jack spotted a mountain goat a third of the way up Bearhat Mountain. The cliff was so steep that it looked as if the animal stood on the face of the Eiger. Impressively, it worked its way across the sheer cliff face, slowly and steadily moving from left to right.

"I wish we were closer," I said, checking the LCD on the back of my camera. "That billy is so far away, it looks like a white dot in a photo. I'm going to save it anyway, to help me remember I saw it."

"You might see others," replied Jack, who had visited Glacier National Park before. "I once photographed a mountain goat under the railing at Logan Pass!"

I became determined to get a decent photo of a mountain goat, but only several hoary marmots appeared in the mist as we retraced our steps back to the car. The cute, pudgy marmots were more than willing to pose as they munched the weeds growing just beyond their burrows. I enjoyed watching

A bighorn sheep, one of many in the park, lolls on the rocks. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

them but had photographed marmots before, while trekking with Jack and Bill over Jonas Pass in Banff National Park several years prior.

We encountered wildlife numerous times in the park. Black bears frequented the hillsides above the campgrounds, gorging on whatever they could find during their pre-hibernation hyperphagia. A red fox and a whitetail doe spied on us while we set up our tents one night at the Kintla Lake campground. The audacious little fox tried to steal one of Jack's Lowa hiking shoes, but only managed to escape with a piece of shoelace. And bighorn sheep, omnipresent in the park, caused more than a couple of traffic jams as we made our way along the limited roadways to the trailheads.

Along the trail to Grinnell Glacier, Bill and I saw several bighorn sheep lolling on the rocks above the trail, including one large ram whose substantial horns curved around its eyes to the point where we wondered if they impaired his vision.

The trail became increasingly more breathtaking as we approached Grinnell Glacier. Above Lake Joséphine, the route hung on the mountainside, reminiscent of an ancient Incan trail cut through a high pass in the Andes. Shortly after we watched the mother mountain goat and her offspring leap from boulder to boulder, the interwoven white fingers of Grinnell Falls came into view, tracing their way from the glacier hundreds of feet down a rock

A red fox scouts near Kintla Lake Campground. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

wall to Grinnell Lake. The trail eventually crested at an overlook, where a park ranger waxed eloquently about the history of the glacier and George Grinnell, while a Columbia ground squirrel scurried among a half-dozen hikers' muddy boots, looking for crumbs.

Bill and I dropped down the last half-mile to the edge of a green-gray tarn hemmed in by a barren precipice called the Garden Wall. To the left of the wall, Grinnell Glacier flowed over a shallow shoulder of Mount Gould, ending at the tarn. It was only then that the remarkable recession of the glaciers in the park hit me. When Grinnell first laid eyes on his namesake glacier, it spanned an impressive 700 acres. Today, it has split into two glaciers: the original Grinnell Glacier, which is now barely 150 acres, and the 57-acre Salamander Glacier, a shelf glacier named for its shape and coloring. The two ice fields split in the 1920s and now sit distinctly apart, the smaller one 200 feet above the larger.

Unlike the coastal glaciers in Alaska, no massive icebergs calved from the end of Grinnell Glacier into the glacial lake into which it melted. The shallow glacier merely petered out. The largest chunk of ice floating in the lake was the size of a pickup truck.

A Columbia ground squirrel scavenges near the upper Grinnell Glacier Trail.
LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

Bill felt compelled to touch the glacier, so we made our way along the shoreline of the small gray-green lake toward the ice sheet. I paused along the way to consider the changes in the park since George Bird Grinnell first set eyes on it. If you don't believe in climate change, a trek to Grinnell Glacier will change your mind. During the last half-century, the glacier has shrunk by more than 40 percent. Scientists predict that if carbon dioxide levels in the earth's atmosphere continue to increase at their current rate, the 25 remaining glaciers in the park will be mostly gone by by 2030 or before. When Grinnell explored the region, there were 150 glaciers.

Grinnell was the first white man to see Grinnell Glacier and the first to predict its eventual disappearance. In 1926, during his last visit to Glacier National Park, he wrote: "The glacier is melting very fast, and the amount of water coming from it is great. All these glaciers are receding rapidly and after a time will disappear."

What about the mountain goats? No one really knows how climate change will affect them. Biologists theorize they might become subject to increased

Grinnell Glacier melts into the water as a hiker on the opposite shore takes a photo.
LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

predation as their habitat becomes more timbered, or perhaps they'll succumb to diseases currently unable to exist in the alpine haunts.

Looking back, our aborted backpacking trip may have been a blessing. We saw more of Glacier National Park than we could have on a backpacking trip and still trekked through breathtaking terrain. I fulfilled my wish to photograph a mountain goat, along with other species endemic to the alpine regions of the northern Rocky Mountains. And I saw, up close, the glaciers for which the park is named, while they still exist.

A longtime member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, Lisa Densmore Ballard is an award-winning writer, photographer, and filmmaker. She splits her time between Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York, when she's not exploring a wild part of the world. Visit her at LisaDensmore.com.

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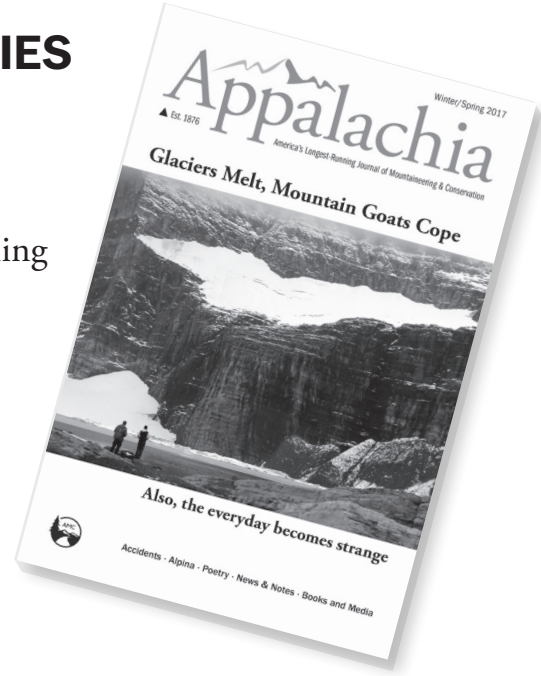

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